

TEACHING LINGUISTICS TO FOREIGN LANGUAGE MAJORS

Allan W. Grundstrom

Bucknell University

Introduction

As a linguist in a foreign language department an important goal for me is to make linguistics a significant part of a curriculum that historically has been the exclusive domain of literary criticism. As a French teacher I want our majors to learn something about the history of the language and something about its grammar from the linguist's point of view. Their experience learning the language with the help of prescriptive, pedagogical grammars provides them with surprisingly little understanding of the way the language works.

I am fortunate in having colleagues who seem to agree, in principle, about the value of including linguistics in our curriculum. And our students are very receptive to the idea, too. My paper today is not about departmental politics or promoting linguistics, but about my efforts to teach linguistics in an advanced foreign language course for undergraduates. My experience is with French, but is surely applicable to teaching linguistics in other languages.

Linguistics in the Foreign Language Curriculum

As it stands now, linguistics is a fairly modest part of our French curriculum. The introductory course in linguistics, taught in English to a wide variety of students, is required of the French major. In addition, I teach two advanced courses, in French, for juniors and seniors: one each spring semester in alternate years. These are the History of the French Language and Linguistic Analysis of French.

It would be desirable, obviously, to subdivide these courses into more specific topics, Old French, phonology, syntax, for example. However, the other demands on my teaching time, the limited number of courses each student can take, and the fact that our students do not seem academically prepared for more specialization, all lead me to conclude that these two general courses are the appropriate ones. Were I to expand the number of courses, it would probably be to create one in phonetics and pronunciation. Such a course would link linguistics to language skill acquisition, and allow me to assume that students have some knowledge of phonetics when they get to the history and analysis courses.

Student Interests

Most of our foreign language majors are self-selected on the basis of their ability and interest in learning foreign language skills. That is what they have always done in their foreign language classes, and society tells them that that is what language majors do. Consequently their primary motivation for continuing their foreign language courses is to get further practice in using the language. We professors may get them interested in linguistics, but that is not why they come to us in the first place.

These student goals have several consequences for our foreign language curriculum and for the linguistics courses in it. First, advanced courses for majors must be taught in the foreign language, not in English. Secondly, these are students who have neither time nor inclination to become linguists, at least not as undergraduates. Often they are seeking an alternative to advanced courses in literature and have little or no idea what to expect from a French linguistics course, even after having taken Linguistics 101. Nevertheless they are very open to the idea of learning something of the linguistic perspective on the French language. The task then is to present to them a new and clearer view of that language by means of linguistic methods, attitudes and insights. This is the converse of our task in a general linguistics course; there we analyze specific languages in order to further their understanding of the nature of language. Here I am using what linguistics knows about the nature of language to help the students learn to analyze and understand a specific foreign language.

If I do not try to make linguists of my students (although occasionally one catches the disease and goes on to graduate school), I do try to broaden the base of their major and to improve their understanding of what the French language is like and how it functions: something a French major should know and doesn't get elsewhere.

The Course in Linguistic Analysis

Of the two French linguistics courses I teach, I will discuss the one in the analysis of French, leaving aside for now the course in the history of the language.

Fourteen years ago, as a second-year member of a French department, I was able to persuade my colleagues to let me convert an advanced grammar course into a linguistics course in the structure of French. The selection of a textbook for the new course did not force me to make any difficult choices. There were simply no textbooks available to choose. Consequently I put together a series of articles, mostly by Pierre Delattre, for the phonology, and adapted a fairly modern French

grammar, *Grammaire Larousse du français contemporain* by Chevalier et al., for the morphology and syntax. That combination served rather well for several years.

Nevertheless, as these materials became dated, I tried several other books. *The Structure of French* by Edgar Meyer was a disappointment. Using a purely structural approach it wasn't any more up-to-date than what I had, and being a programmed text in English it stirred little enthusiasm among the students. *Elements de linguistique française: syntaxe* by Dubois and Dubois-Charlier turned out to be too technical, and a bit sloppy in its analysis. My students couldn't handle it. More successful was Albert Valdman's *French Phonology and Morphology*. Valdman treats the topic at about the right level. His book assumes no previous knowledge of linguistics, yet is demanding and has good exercises. Unfortunately it is written in English and does not cover syntax.

Finally last spring I took advantage of a sabbatical leave to write a textbook for this course: one that would fit the needs of undergraduate French majors at Bucknell and elsewhere. The guidelines were:

1. It must be written in French.
2. It must be at the intellectual level of advanced undergraduates.
3. It must cover the major aspects of phonology, morphology and syntax in one semester.
4. It must have good exercises to supplement the explanations.
5. It must focus on the analysis of French instead of on linguistic theory.
6. It must emphasize analytic approach over information.

The Textbook: *L'analyse du français*

The book was written while I was teaching the course. The students got their textbook in serial-like installments, usually the class day before the assignment was to be read. The result is a manuscript that closely parallels the course as I teach it. After a brief introduction, the book has three major parts: phonetics and phonology, morphology, and syntax. This progression is used, not so much because it is the traditional order in structural linguistics (in fact, the course is largely based upon standard generative theory), but because it allows me

to treat increasingly long segments of an utterance and to begin with the concrete aspects before going on to the more abstract. In other words, this organization of the topic does not stem from linguistics theory, but from pedagogical concerns.

About 40% of the semester is devoted to phonetics and phonology. That emphasis reflects my own personal interests, as well as the large place usually given to the sound system in the teaching of French. It is here, too, that I take the time to introduce the notions of abstract underlying forms, and derivation of surface forms by generative rules. This section begins with an introduction to phonetic transcription accompanied by a set of exercises on tape. These increase in length and difficulty from isolated words to a full minute of spontaneous dialogue. Students find this a challenging task and never do get to the point where they can transcribe natural speech without many errors. By contrast, the chapter on phonetic articulation is straightforward factual learning which takes the students some time to assimilate, but is not difficult for them. Exercises include the standard labeling of places of articulation, drawing tongue positions, and identifying sounds by their phonetic features.

After this treatment of concrete phonetics the course moves on to phonology and the beginnings of abstraction. Phonological criteria are introduced and used to establish the inventory of phonemes. Special attention is given to mid-vowels and semivowels, because they provide some interesting phonological problems that challenge the students' ability to analyze. Generative phonological rules are introduced for the first time in order to derive some semivowels from underlying vowels. Exercises include the use of distinctive features, arguments for and against certain phonemic interpretations, and the formulation of simple phonological rules.

After phonemes we move on to the next-sized segments of speech. The chapter on syllables covers the tendency for open syllabification, the consonant clusters permitted, and the coarticulation of sounds. Exercises are on syllable division and consonant assimilation. The chapter on prosodies distinguishes between two kinds of rhythmic groups: the accent group and the intonation group, and introduces the ACCENT D'INSISTANCE, or emphatic stress. These phenomena are identified, described phonetically, and transcribed. There are exercises on all three of these aspects of the prosodies.

There is one chapter each on the complex phenomena of liaison and mute *E*. Both of these are treated by means of special latent sounds that are represented by a capital letter in the underlying form. These latent sounds are then either realized or not realized according to phonological rules. This solution, borrowed from Albert Valdman's book, seems to be a compromise between standard theory and natural generative

phonologies. These sounds are inserted by rule, so to speak, but they also appear in abstract underlying forms. Exercises include providing appropriate underlying forms and giving the correct realizations of liaison and mute *E* in phrases.

The second major part of the book deals with the structure of words. The first chapter of the section is a rather simple presentation of word derivation by suffix, prefix and word compounding. The following chapter, on noun and adjective inflection, develops further the concept of latent sounds, since number and gender are considered to be marked by latent *Z* and latent *E* respectively. Morphophonological rules are introduced to explain nasalization and vowel velarization before latent *L* and latent *J*. Exercises emphasize derivation of words from underlying forms by rules.

The last chapter of this section is fairly long and complicated, reflecting the nature of verb inflection. Emphasis is placed upon the similarity to noun inflection: two endings (one for tense/mood and one for person/number) are added to a stem. Here, too, endings are often the latent sounds *E* and *Z*. Latent consonant realization rules and vowel stem alternation account for all but a few of the stem variations in the present tense. Three separate stems are posited for each verb: present, future, and past. Exercises ask for these three underlying stems and the derivation of many different verb forms by the addition of proper endings and the application of phonological and morphophonological rules.

The third, and last section of the course presents an elementary generative description of the syntax of simple sentences. The analysis used is my adaptation of the standard theory as applied to French by Dubois and Dubois-Charlier. Most of this section is devoted to the phrase structure rules for sentence markers, noun phrases, and verb phrases. Each of these topics constitutes a chapter of the book. The only transformations introduced are those required to complete the derivation of these three elements of a simple sentence. Exercises have the students draw appropriate tree diagrams for various sentences according to the rules presented.

One of the problems I encountered in designing the course and writing the textbook was that many basic processes of the language had no generally accepted solution, or were simply never treated in the literature. Therefore I frequently made up my own solutions, taking the risk that the analysis offered would be idiosyncratic, and consequently less valuable for an introductory book. To give just two examples, I designed my own system for transcribing the prosodies, and I made up a transformational rule of noun phrase agreement for number and gender.

Student Response to the Course

The class of sixteen students that served as guinea pigs for this book-in-formulation responded very favorably. They were fascinated by this very unfamiliar approach to French grammar, for it was very new to all of them. It soon became clear during the course that they wanted to spend most of the class time doing the exercises. That seemed to be the best way for them to come to understand thoroughly the analyses presented in the text. I had hoped that they could give me some feedback on the clarity and level of the explanations in the book, but they were apparently too close to these very new ideas to be able to have that kind of perspective. If they did not understand something, they tended to blame themselves, rather than blame my writing. All the students found it to be a challenging and a rigorous course, even though from a linguist's point of view the material remained at an elementary level. They all worked hard at it, and they did better on tests than any of my previous classes, but I think we went about as far we could go in a one semester course.

There was, of course, a range of talent in the class. What is most interesting about that range is that performance here seemed to be uncorrelated with performance in other aspects of French studies. Some of the students who were good at literary criticism were bewildered by this analytic approach to the language. My hunch is that performance in this kind of course is correlated best with mathematical problem solving ability, which is not required, of course, in other foreign language studies.

Conclusion

My experience with this course and student response to it over the years brings me to conclude that there is a place for linguistics in a foreign language department. Foreign language majors will be better prepared, especially those who go out to teach, if we can lead them to even a few linguistic insights. Likewise, linguistics will be more visible, and better understood by the society, if it makes a substantial contribution to the foreign language curricula: not just to methods of foreign language learning, but also to the kinds of things we expect advanced students to know.

Foreign language majors constitute a 'market' for linguistic knowledge that is relatively untapped. We need simply to go to these students where they are. We need to be willing to teach in the foreign language, prepare the materials necessary to do so, and readjust slightly our balance between linguistic theory and insight into a particular language. Most North American students take a foreign language at one time or another. If we can become a part of their curricula, perhaps the next generation of students will not have to ask us, "What is linguistics?"